



*Mmmm, that next letterpress project—it has to be a little something out of the ordinary.
What to do, what to do?*

*A few of our APA members were asked how they kicked their creative process into gear.
Here's what they said...*

(Tell us what you do.)

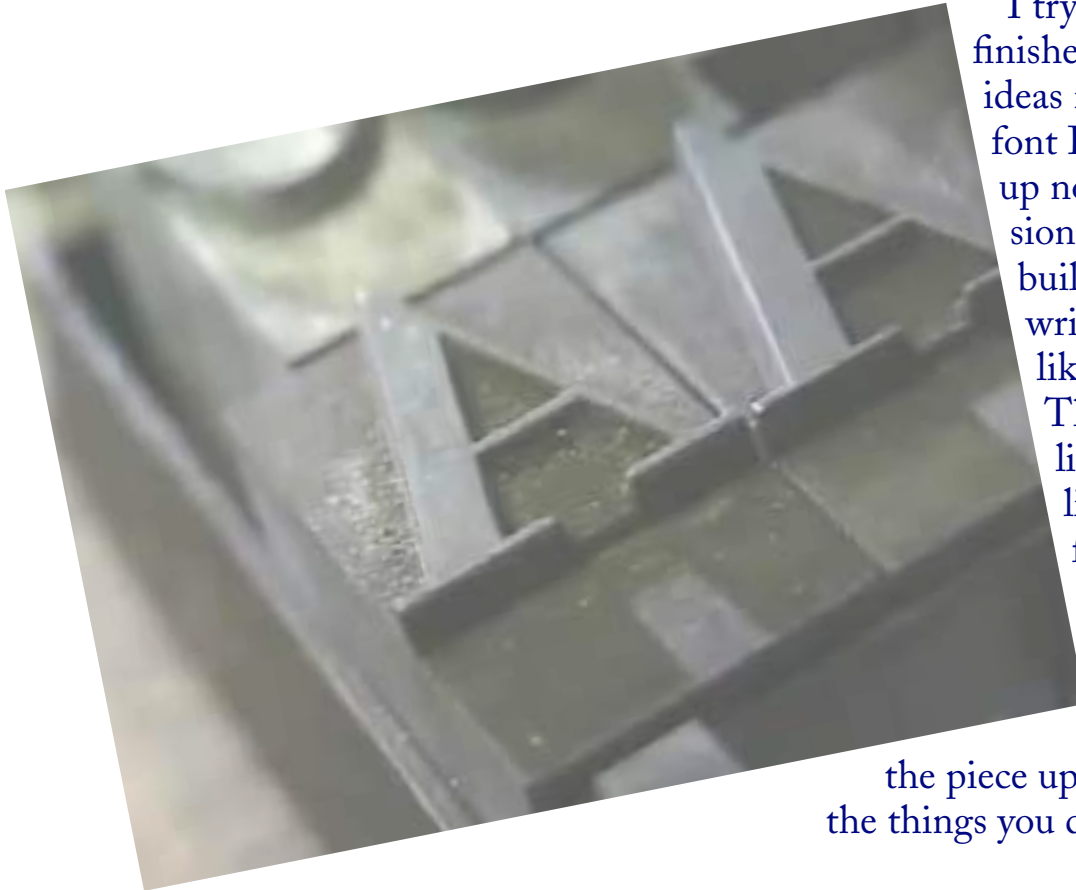


Generally I find inspiration right out of the blue at odd times. I try to quickly scribble down the idea and perhaps make a thumb-nail sketch. The idea can be in the form of a visual or sometimes just an idea of a thought or message to set and print.

I try to keep these sketches and notes on one of the worktops in the shop, that way I know where to find them for reference. A lot of my inspiration simply comes from having a recently acquired typeface that I can't wait to print with.

I try not to be too precise in exactly what I intend the finished piece to look like, simply because some brilliant ideas need to be drastically altered because the “perfect” font I had in mind either is short on characters or ends up not fitting the space! A whole LOT of design decisions are made in-the-stick and as the form is being built. A lot of tinkering and compromising (and re-writing!) happens at this point in the process. I also like to pull a carbon-paper proof at various stages. This lets me see what the visual layout and fit looks like without having to ink anything up. I also really like to let a job lay around for several days before finalizing and printing it. That gives me more time to think and maybe redo or readjust things. The job can be seen with fresh eyes if left alone for a while.

One great tip I learned in art school. To make sure your proportions and layout are “right”, turn the piece upside down and study it that way. You'd be amazed at the things you detect by doing that.



Almost all of the projects I design and print are for clients, so my process begins with a casual chat to uncover exactly what they envision for their piece. Recently, I worked with a reputable jazz drummer to produce a limited number of invitations to his own 40th birthday party. The event was to be a classy affair at a popular restaurant in New York, and he wanted to give his guests a keepsake of the evening while conveying important details about the party.

We decided that chipboard cd sleeves would be a perfect medium given that the guests were also musicians, so I started the design process by researching how large type was stylized on both popular jazz album covers in the 60's and other letterpress posters. The outside of the sleeve lent itself nicely to creating a type collage of the date of the drummer's birth, the party, and his age. I created three digital mockups for him to choose from that explored different ideas of this collage, along with how it

would translate into readable text on the inside of the sleeve, and an additional insert with restaurant information. Creating three mock-ups for each project does force me to fully develop different ideas that I might not have explored had I only put together one idea.

Both the drummer and I were naturally drawn to the warm colors I used, but we decided to leave our comfort zones and explore blues and purples, which turned out to be quite striking on the chipboard sleeves. He was also open to the slight experimentation that would occur on the press when working with wood type. While I create my initial mockups digitally, they are based on what a piece will look like when set in metal and wood. This process gives me greater flexibility and speed in designing for letterpress, while still committing myself to only working with handset type for the final piece. My challenge is to convey this process clearly to clients and give them the visual tools necessary to see how their piece is designed and will ultimately be printed.



CLIENT: Dana Hall
DATE: 1-27-09



I collect and print with wood type as my core focus. Most of what I design and print is just for fun (often meant to be tongue-in-cheek), or is connected with my membership in APA or The American Printing History Association.

I usually start with a vision in my mind's eye, followed by a sketch on paper. Then I go to the stone and start working with wood type, usually trying out several fonts until I get it right. With apologies to Beatrice Ward, readability is low on my list of priorities, while graphic punch is high. I am usually trying to send some sort of a message but I want my piece to be seen first, read second. My products are usually signs or broadsides, but I of course do find myself printing business cards, and stationary. I am always trying to produce something striking or beautiful, and new. I am a student of the many design traditions in the history of print, but although I usually am using 19th century wood type I try not to get stuck in that time frame.

I print on an 8x12 C&P, two Vandercooks, an SP-15 and 25-24 Test Press, and a Hoe 20 x 26 iron hand press. I look forward to the future when I can spend more time printing.

First, when is the deadline?

Second, what is the purpose of the piece?

Last, but not least, what is the motivation for me?

My thinking process is not very complex. It's either Part 1 or Part 2.

Part 1- Serious thinking

If I leave myself enough time to meet the deadline, which doesn't often happen, I really do some serious thinking about what I'm going to print.

I write some copy, do some editing and before setting the text I look for a font that hopefully it has enough "e's" to actually set the final manuscript.

Now begins the search through my "vast" collection of dingbats, cuts and old engravings. Hopefully something in one of my cases will either work with my idea or just add some slight decoration to the final concept.

Put the whole thing together, ink the press and start cranking out the piece.

The whole process from idea to printed piece could



take anywhere from 5 days to a few weeks.

Part 2 – Just shootin' from the hip

Deadline is in 3 days to be at the mailer. (Normal turnaround for me.)

Go into my print shop at 7:30 pm. With "zero" in the way of an idea only knowing what the piece is for. Example to promote Treasure Gems (due May first by the way.)

Start setting copy in the stick. Try to remember where I put that new cut I know I have...but where is it? Next compose the whole thing and pull a proof, correct the spelling mistakes. Ink the 8x12 C&P...look for my favorite stock, Strathmore 88. Print the whole job and cut it to size.

Out of the pressroom by 11:00 pm.

Colophon: The fact that I'm a graphic designer helps alot. Sometime I pick a face before I have the idea or I pick an interesting cut that just seems to work for me.

To be honest I'm never sure what will happen in my pressroom.



I always feel a rush of excitement with a new project and begin the thought process by daydreaming. At this point my thoughts and imaginings can be grandiose, but after a few days I rein it in and focus on more manageable ideas. But that first bit of excitement is the hook that pulls me in and engages the project. Sometimes, to stimulate ideas, I write about the concept — a kind of stream of consciousness typing. My brain hops around a lot, so this helps to pull thoughts together and give direction. I also look for visual inspiration in a scrapbook where I keep images clipped from magazines and catalogs.

I look back over recent print projects and identify design elements to either repeat or take a step further. Starting from scratch on a design is time consuming, so I try to avoid it. But the thinking and planning is the easy part, it's idealistic and not fraught with practical challenges and limitations.

The most fruitful part of the process is when I actually start pulling out type and laying it down. I can see what will work and what won't. All of that stuff that went on in my head up to this point is vital to the process but if I need to, I let it go and let the project take on a life of its own.



My father (who just died at 98) was a sign painter. I grew up idolizing the tools, the practice, and the wonder of his skill. Of course I wanted to be a player too. I wanted to be able to draw. I copied ships and trains out of books. Then I wanted to make multiples of those images. It is not surprising that I was drawn to printmaking and wood engraving. Wood engraving led me to the broader world of letterpress and relief printing.

I did manage to become an illustrator during my Viet Nam stint, and it probably not only saved my life, but I learned a lot about production. After putting in thirty-nine years as an art teacher (and still going), the greatest education I think I ever got is from the APA and the letterpress printers I've met.

For me, it all comes down to drawing. I often go to local studio sessions sketching the figure from life. I also set up still-life compositions of dried plants and organic objects. Drawing is

exploring — a language that relates how you really feel about things. It is as marvelously complex as we are complex. Sometimes it isn't easy. Drawing is an anchor and an inspiration and one of the most basic of human needs going back to caves thousands of years ago. I think we printers all do it to some degree.

What drawing or designing any project in the graphic arts requires is having something to honestly say. One has to be true to oneself. If I am not a modernist or an abstract expressionist, then what am I? What really gets me thinking and excited? Sometimes I think I am a reincarnated trade engraver. I love detail. I love the play of tones on surfaces. I also love the lore of printing and the tools... the wondrous type, presses, cuts and machines that one can use. With these we can say something perhaps beautiful, perhaps thought-provoking or perhaps just silly fun. Most of all for me it is the natural world. It is the complexity of forms if one can focus and SEE the wonder that lies everywhere. Unfortunately we are a culture that has rewarded instant gratification over intense study. I have to keep shutting out the distractions and seeking what is worthy and valuable. Usually it

resides in the underbelly of life, not on that slick surface.

The biggest problem I ever face is my own human frailties and ego. When I can get around pride and fear of failure, I am then open to looking and learning. Then it gets fun. Then I'm in the "zone." Then I am exploring and I am truly in the moment. Then I forget my neurosis—my compulsions and perfectionisms. It is the process as much as the product. Each experience gives you a new opportunity to improve.

To summarize, my approach usually starts with drawing and how it can be used in an engraving. That means I can use those sacred tools and a press. Perhaps I can use some of this wondrous type to add words to the design — let's play around with that. One of life's thrills is pulling that first proof off the press. Then comes the work. The printing. The concentration it involves and the sweat factor. One feels a true fatigue at the end of a run. Contentment is well earned, and rest is deep and pleasurable. We then can send these prints off into the world. Mostly though, the reward is something mysterious. It catches me when I am not trying to think about it. It transcends words but reaffirms that we are so lucky to have this creative process.





My letterpress projects usually start as ideas for artist's books. Some come as suggestions for collaborations, some as concepts for exhibitions, some come from playing with words and paper. Others develop out of one-of-a-kind experimental books I decide I want to edition. In terms of letterpress printing, the most challenging to date was Jack!, a jack-in-a-box book that was printed on a single sheet 3" x 25' (yes, that's feet).

In the 90's I made numerous experimental accordion books using Canal paper, made by St. Armand in Montreal. The paper is thick and doesn't have much sizing, and it comes in a 25' roll that seemed to be begging to be folded into one big concertina. Those books were blank, and the paper resisted being folded enough to explode out of a box when it was opened. I liked the idea of a book as jack-in-the-box, and finally started collecting nursery rhymes and sea shanties to print a book.

I wanted to print everything on a single sheet so the text

block would be solid, and I wanted the books to be small but legible, so I settled on a 3" width and set about printing.

It took some time figuring out what sizes of type would fit the format and look all right, and my printer's devil set the type while I made linoleum cuts for the images. I could only print 3 "pages" at a time on my 8x12 C&P, so I proofed on the tympan, drew out the pages and set up the registration, adding a bit of double-stick tape to help keep the paper in place. I folded the long ends of the paper, wrapped them with rubber bands, and held the section to be printed in place by holding the ends between the arms of the press while the devil hand-cranked the flywheel to print.

We started with 35 sheets and ended up with an edition of 24 copies. 33 times through the press for each sheet, all hand cranked, no smashed fingers, I'll count that as a success!



When I start out my jobs for the bundle, say, for **Treasure Gems**, I start with a concept. It's usually a line I've written down somewhere meaning to incorporate typography and illustration to it. Once I find the line in my journal, I'll generate some pencil layouts for it. Feeling out the layout, trying different typefaces. I then figure out how I'm going to come up with the illustration, whether it be me drawing it, combining different sources, or using an old photo from somewhere. I then lay it all out on the computer and do final tweaks to the design. If I have wood type that's close in point size, I might adjust the layout to incorporate that. Or attempt to do that on press with some elements handset, and some photopolymer. That's where it gets fun. I enjoy combining the old and new and seeing what comes out in the end.

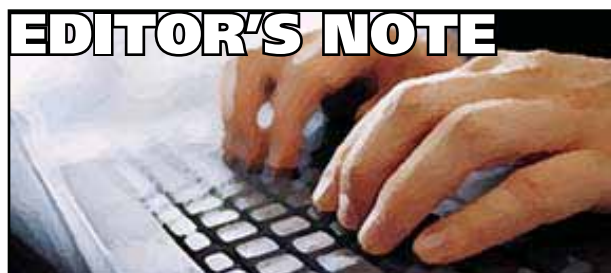
If they only sold creativity in the bottle!

I always knew there wasn't any one answer as to how one gets those creative juices flowing. The article in this issue just proves it.

It has been something that constantly interests me. I teach letterpress classes once in a while at [The Paper Studio](#). It is owned by one of our new members, Cindy Iverson. The place is also a haven for book artists and other very creative souls. Much of what I see down there amazes me and I constantly tell Cindy that one of my goals in hanging around the place is that if I can rub shoulders with enough talented and creative people—maybe some of that creativity will rub off on me! So far no luck on that theory.

The idea for the “idea” series here came about in the midst of one of my upcoming print jobs. Luckily all of my printing is for hobby consumption and I don't have to worry about pleasing a customer. That doesn't mean that I don't labor over coming

up with something relatively creative ideas when a project looms. I do find that for the most part, my thought process in developing a project always starts off of course with a general concept of what I want. But the thing really has to sit a few days or maybe a week and incubate!



Some great ideas for some tinkering with a project idea has come at the darndest places and times. But I have found that the planning process is one of the most interesting aspects of printing—well aside from the fact that I enjoy setting type. But once I get the first good copy off the press the rest is drudgery!



If you haven't sent in your APA dues—let loose of that \$30 and make a check out to the APA and send it to the secretary: Mike O'Connor, P. O. Box 18117, Fountain Hills, AZ 85269.



Long-time member Frank Anderson #337 celebrated his 90th birthday on January 29. A belated Happy Birthday Frank!

Ray Nichols #803 was searching around the Letpress List for some ideas about printing long sheets via letterpress. He found some. He used a roller from a C&P proofing press and an 8' bed that they (Jill Cypher) constructed. You can see their efforts on their [blog](#) and you can also see their second attempt which resulted in an 80" wide accordion-folded book on their [website](#).

Many of our members are photopolymer users and have cylinder presses. Recently released is the fourth edition of Gerald Lange's "Printing digital type on a hand-operated flatbed cylinder press." It's a must read for those using photopolymer. You can get more details [here](#).

I always knew most of our members are multi-talented folks. I came across another example of that—regarding member John Henry—and I think you might find it interesting too. Check out this [site](#).



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